How Sabattis Got His Christmas Dinner

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BY

From the Author

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Dr. Geo. McAleer.

"THE daughter of Natanis will have fresh meat for Christmas and be merry. Sabattis' bow is strong and his arrow true. Sabattis will go."

The great logs in the crude stone fire-place burned fiercely, and the crackling flames gave warmth and added cheer and comfort to the little log cabin. Jerked moose meat of the last killing in the deep snows of winter hung suspended from the rafters, bear skins and other peltry adorned the walls, and beds of elastic, fragrant spruce boughs built a few feet above the floor upon light, springing poles of hackmatack in the corners of the cabin opposite to the fireplace, together with some cooking utensils and rude articles of furniture, completed the furnishings and adornment of the cabin home of Sabattis and the daughter of Natanis, the chief of the tribe, now his squaw of a few years.

Humble as was this home, it was a palace in convenience and comfort in comparison with the bark and skin wigwams of but a few years before, and which were the only habitations known to the Indians even in coldest winter weather before the advent of the missionaries, Recollects and Jesuits, who thus impressed them with christian influences, the sanctity of the family, the superiority of the sedentary as opposed to the nomadic life, and other christian virtues.

"But sposem bad Heengleeshmans come ag'in from the land of the southwind way off and shootem our Black gown, burn our church, and kill your squaw and papooses, and all the peoples? Then there is no snow to get him the game."

"Natanis is strong. His braves have the hearts of bears and the eyes of all the stars. If the Engleesh come they will find a grave-yard. The snow-maker made a big ring around the moon last night,—he will give plenty of snow. Sabattis will go before the sun gets out of bed tomorrow and our fire will cook fresh meat to make us glad at Christmas."

This conversation took place more than one hundred and fifty years ago at Naurantsouak, now Norridgewok, on the banks of the Kennebec river, in the language of the Connibas, later known as the Norridgewoks, an extensive tribe of the great Abenaki nation.

During the afternoon Sabattis visited some of the warm ravines between the jutting craggy hillsides and gathered an armful of trailing arbutus,—the great pink swelling blossoms needing only the blessing of warmth and moisture to blossom forth in all their wealth of color and fragrance as in early spring.

He fashioned three beautiful garlands which he placed in water in water-tight basins made from white birch bark, and as the little chapel bell sounded the Angelus he wended his way thither and placed one upon the main altar beneath the lamp of perpetual adoration, another upon the altar of Our Lady, and the other upon the altar dedicated to the holy man, Saint Joseph.

Long before the break of day Sabattis set out alone upon his journey to secure good cheer for the Yuletide season in his humble cabin. Winter had not yet set in, there was but an apology for snow upon the ground, and but little ice had formed along the shores of the slack water.

His moccasins pointed towards the head waters of the Sebastacook where it takes its course from the foot hills and mountains beyond. Camp was made the first night many miles away in the wilderness towards the land of the setting sun. He had seen no game nor signs thereof, but when the snow would come all would be changed. The trail was resumed with earliest dawn and every nook and corner carefully, noiselessly scrutinized and explored,—and yet no deer, caribou, or moose!

The day was leaden and lifeless; dense snow clouds banked the horizon; no sunshine broke through the tree-tops to tell him the hour or location. Snow in great broad flakes began to fall, and darkness following soon after Sabattis made camp near the summit of the divide which separates the Androscoggin river from the Kennebec. The hooting of owls and the howling of hungry wolves were his only companionship during the night. The morning broke clear and intensely cold and plenty of dry, fluffy snow upon the ground made ideal conditions for successful still hunting.

Sabattis would now surely get fresh meat for Christmas. With brave heart he started out early following along the highlands which skirt the southern shore of the principal tributary stream as it journeys along in its course to join with its fellows to swell the waters of the Kennebec.

He soon came to the tracks of a large buck which led up the sloping hillside towards the heavy growth of timber at its summit. These he stealthily followed for some time until he came to a place where a Loup Cervier had pounced down from a tree upon the unsuspecting deer and dragging him to earth had killed him, tearing to pieces and destroying in his blind rage what he could not devour.

He was soon upon a new trail which he followed for miles only to find where a pack of wolves had taken it up and cut him out;—and so it was throughout the day,—trail after trail taken up and followed only to end in disappointment.

The night of the third day found him making camp in a ravine which lies between the range of hills which divide the Wabaquasset, now the Sandy River, from the Sebasticook. He was tired. Every arrow was still in his quiver. But he was not dispirited. He was going to have fresh meat to furnish good cheer for the Christmas dinner.

Did not *la bonne sainte Vierge* tell him so when he placed the votive offering of Arbutus upon her altar? Did she not say "Sabattis will succeed!" "Sabattis will succeed!"

The night was intensely cold, but in a hastily constructed and comfortable lean-to before a roaring fire on the leeward side of a great boulder in the ravine, and wrapped in his blanket and caribou skin and fatigued with the exertions of the previous days, but entirely confident of ultimate success, Sabattis was soon lost in deep and restful sleep.

With the earliest dawn he was again upon the trail when his keen eyes soon discovered a magnificent buck above him on the hillside within easy range. He had just arisen from the bed wherein he slept and was in the act of stretching himself as is their wont.

With the seeming speed and stillness of a flash of lightning sped the flint-tipped arrow of Sabattis, and soon the snow was crimsoned with the spurting heart blood of the noble buck. A few wild bounds and to earth he fell never to rise again,—a few convulsive twitchings of muscles and soon all was over.

"*La bonne sainte Vierge* tells true! *La bonne sainte Vierge* tells true!" rang out clear and joyous on the morning air. The act of dis-embowelling was soon performed, and cutting some small beech saplings Sabattis returned to his camp-fire where he passed and re-passed them over the coals and finally twisted them into an endless rope withe of sufficient length to encircle the antlers and pass over his shoulders, and so harnessed to his quarry he turned his steps homeward.

Strengthened with the strength born of success and cheered by the welcome which he knew awaited him from the anxious ones at home, his burden slipped lightly over the snow and scarcely impeded his footsteps.

He journed on until he had crossed the last ridge of land which divides the Wabaquasset river from the Sebasticook, the shore of which he reached soon after mid-day. Here he made his camp-fire, broiled tid-bits of venison, impaled upon a green forked sapling, over the burning coals, and ate his noon-day meal.

He tested the ice upon the river, and on the flat water at least it was safe and his heart was glad. He could now more easily and quickly travel two miles than he could one through the woods, and the log cabin and the loved ones were already several miles nearer.

He was now hurrying along upon the ice which was slightly covered with snow, and his burden was much lighter.

Ah! But what sound is that? A tremor shook his sturdy frame. A deathly pallor spread over his bronzed face. He stood as if paralyzed. Again? Ah, yes! and nearer! The dreaded wolves are in full pursuit! It required but a moment to think, decide, and act!

He would leave the forequarters to satisfy the ravenous wolves while he escaped with the saddle. They were soon cut asunder and shouldering his burden Sabattis ran as Sabattis never ran before. Fear accelerated his steps and hope spurred him on.

Louder and more fierce grew the howling of the pack, and as he cast a backward look at a bend in the river a mile away, he saw the angry wolves fighting and tearing each other in their attempts to secure a morsel of the meat.

Lucky escape for which Sabattis was duly grateful, and he forgot not to offer a prayer to the holy Virgin in thanksgiving for her good offices in his behalf.

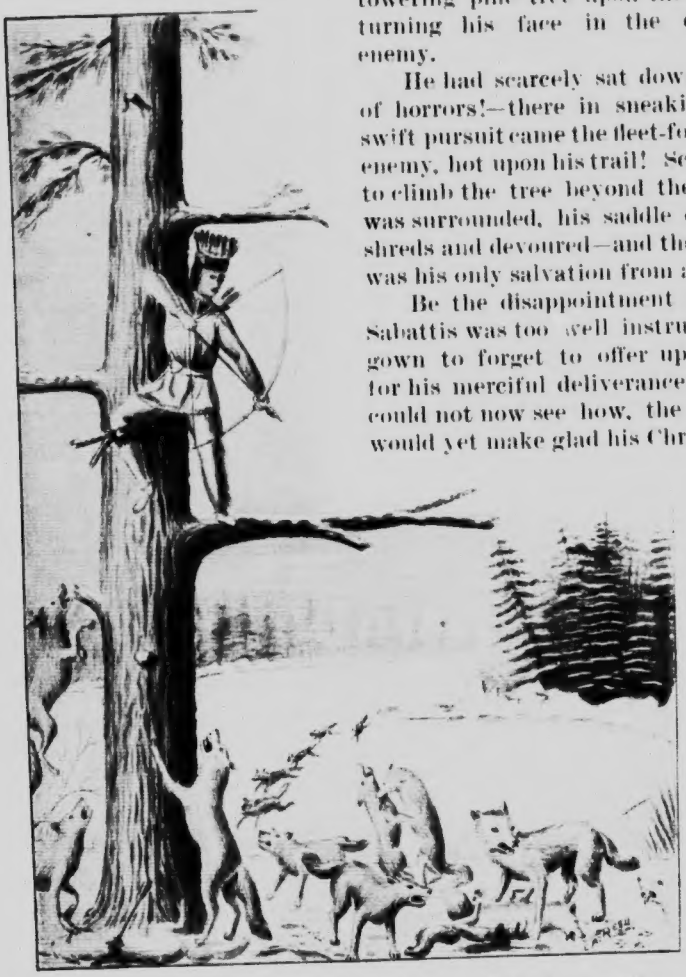
But would the wolves be content with their portion and slink back into the depth of the forest when they had devoured it? Or would they again take up his trail and follow in pursuit?

He well knew their cowardly nature when alone, but what would they not do when gathered in a large pack and spurred on by hunger and the taste of blood?

Beads of perspiration rolled down his cheeks, but with renewed energy he increased his pace and hurried on. The hideous howling of the wolves had died away in the distance and he took new courage.

He must now be miles away from them. Fatigue seemed to overpower him. Nature called a halt. He would rest a few minutes.

He swung his load from his shoulders and sat down upon a rock beneath a towering pine tree upon the bank of the river, turning his face in the direction of the enemy.



He had scarcely sat down when, horror of of horrors!—there in sneaking, noiseless and swift pursuit came the fleet-footed, blood thirsty enemy, hot upon his trail! Scarcely had he time to climb the tree beyond their reach before it was surrounded, his saddle of venison torn to shreds and devoured—and the friendly pine tree was his only salvation from a similar fate!

Be the disappointment now what it may Sabattis was too well instructed by the Black gown to forget to offer up a fervent prayer for his merciful deliverance; and although he could not now see how, the good *sainte Vierge* would yet make glad his Christmas!

It was a gloomy, murky afternoon. No ray of sunshine gave added light or warmth. There is no twilight in the woods in winter. Sabattis will have no comfortable lean-to tonight. Sabattis can build him no camp-fire to give him warmth and comfort. Sabattis must stay in the tree-top. How long? Until help comes? When will help come?

Meanwhile the air was violently assailed by the most hideous noises,—the snarling, growling and fighting of the wolves over a bone or shred of meat which had escaped their fury.

If Sabattis could only make them destroy one another! Sabattis will try. His bow was safely upon his back and his quiver had suffered the loss of but a single arrow since he left home upon his self imposed task.

Placing one foot upon a projecting limb and twining the other leg around another a little higher up and nearly at a right angle with the first, he braced himself against the tree, took careful aim, and the twang of the string told the power it gave to the arrow. An intense howl of pain, clearly heard above the general din, and spouting blood, told that the arrow had found its mark in the heart of the most ferocious dog wolf of the pack.

At the smell of blood he was pounced upon and torn limb from limb by the others. In their blind frenzy they attacked one another and the woods echoed and re-echoed with the unearthly noise.

The arrows of Sabattis flew thick and unerring until to his surprise and regret he discovered that but one remained in his quiver!

The ground was strewn with dead and dying wolves and still the carnage went on. The unusual excitement and terror of the scene occupied all his thoughts, but now as night descended and the cold increased he found himself nearly freezing. He ascended to the thickest branches near the tree top for greater protection, wrapped himself in his caribou skin and bound himself to the trunk of the tree by his blanket lest he be overcome by sleep and fall from his lofty perch among the devouring wolves.

When the moon arose it revealed dead and dying wolves in all directions. Some of the badly wounded were slowly dragging themselves to the cover of the woods, while from the few remaining came feeble whines and moans as if overcome by the dreadful carnage, satiety and wounds.

Exhausted by fatigue and hunger Sabattis passed a troubled night, and in his dreams he lived over again the adventures, excitements, and dangers of the day. Again and again he had met with success; again and again did his squaw and his papooses run forth to meet him, laden with the spoils of the chase; again and again did the earth rise up beneath his feet and all became dark and noisome!

Day at last dawned and arousing himself from his troubled slumbers he discovered that the last wolf had taken its departure,—only the sickening sight of the blood stained snow and of dead wolves torn asunder and scattered about, remained to tell of his peril and the deadly encounter.

Carefully scrutinizing every possible place that still might screen a lurking enemy Sabattis slowly descended from the tree. It was the day before Christmas. He must be home that night. He could not turn back. He had but a single arrow in his quiver. He had no fresh meat. Would *la bonne sainte Vierge* disappoint?—oh, no! no! no! Did she not say "Sabattis will succeed!" "Sabattis will succeed!"

He would get his fresh meat, his heart would be glad, his cabin would have good cheer, his Christmas would be merry.

He hunted around amid the scene of conflict to find some of his arrows, but, alas! not a sound one did he find, only the broken shafts of some, the flint arrow heads gone from others, the feathers to ensure accuracy of flight stripped and torn away from others.

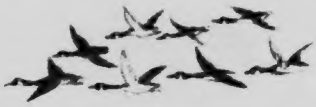
With a heart less buoyant than at any time since he left home he crossed the river to the opposite side from which the straggling wolves had taken their departure and hastened on with all speed until he journeyed several miles away knowing that it was useless to look for any game nearer to the scene of the conflict and uproar of the previous afternoon and night.

With advancing day he became more wary and cautious. His stealthy step fell noiseless upon the fleecy snow, his keen eyes sought out and investigated every likely spot and possible lurking place where the quarry he sought might be concealed. All the knowledge and skill of the wily Indian were working at their best.

But no game came in range,—and not even an old track was found in the snow to give encouragement. Every hour brought him nearer to the settlement and his chances were rapidly growing less and less, but the Virgin's promise still buoyed him up, and the goddess Hope still spurred him on.

He needed no sun in the heavens to tell him it was past mid-day and that night would soon be at hand. He worked back toward the top of the divide where he hoped he might find some game yarded. He followed the crest of the hill with all the patience and skill of the most ardent still hunter,—every sense keen, alert, tense. But no pleasing sight of game rewarded his efforts. His heart sunk within him.

Must he go home empty-handed? The afternoon was well spent and he had now but few miles to go.



But what a Christmas eve for the proud Sabattis! Fate as cruel as stern had deprived him of his fresh meat and Christmas good cheer. The day was spent and night was at hand. There was no use to hunt longer. He would go home.

The relation of his adventure will at least tell the tale of his success, and his fortunate escape will break the force and dull the edge of the cruel, crushing disappointment. With tired footsteps and a heavy heart Sabattis slowly descended the sloping hill-side and in the early twilight he was again upon the ice of the Sebasticook. The ice along the shore was safe but occasional reaches of open water were discernible where the current was swift.

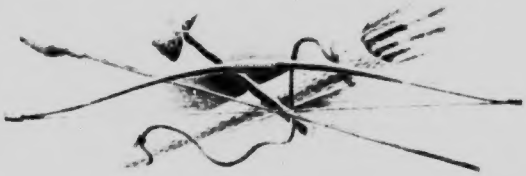
He hastened on,—but was it the haste of despair? Sabattis would have said no! He will yet succeed, he cannot now see how,—but somewhere,—somehow. "Sabattis will succeed!" "Sabattis will succeed!" kept ringing in his ears,—and to him the promise was as real as life itself.

The twilight of early evening deepened into the darkness of night and he hurried on.

The great full moon rose resplendent in the east, and the outlying cabins of the village came into view. Already the windows of the little chapel are aglow with light, as loving hands of old and young make it more beautiful with a wealth of fragrant evergreen as a fitting decoration for the midnight Mass which is soon to usher in the feast of the Nativity.

The open channel in the river swept in close to the shore.

But hark! what music is that in the air? The honking, honking of a flock of wild geese on their way to their winter home in southern waters fell like sweetest music upon the ears of Sabattis. He crouched low in the bushes. Down pitched the flock into the open water for the night within easy range.

They had scarcely alighted when the sharp twang of his bow string is heard on the still night air, and there tumbling and floundering about are two fat geese pinioned together by an arrow which passed through the neck of one and was safely anchored in the body of the other.

He cut a long sapling with which he brought them within his reach and soon there was joy in the cabin of Sabattis, and fresh meat and good cheer for the Christmas dinner.